

ON THREE HIGHLY ORNATE BOOMERANGS FROM THE BULLOO RIVER.

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(Plate xv.)

The much more highly ornate carving and colouring of the weapons and implements of the Australian Aborigines throughout Northern Australia, as compared with those of the southern and western portions of the Continent, has no doubt struck all those who have made the Ethnology of these strange peoples their study. This fact has been already commented on by the late Mr. R. B. Smyth,* but with the knowledge we now possess his remarks are somewhat too casual. He observed that the boomerangs in use around Rockingham Bay, N.E. Queensland, and the districts adjacent thereto, were ornamented with incised lines, differing in this respect from those employed in the southern and western parts of Australia. Although, as may be inferred from my opening paragraph, this may be true in a general sense, yet the fact that Sir Thomas Mitchell,† the most celebrated of our Surveyors-General, and, at the same time, one of the most eminent of our Explorers, met with highly carved boomerangs, as early as 1836, in portions of the country much further to the south-east, to a great extent refutes Smyth's too sweeping generalisation.

In no weapon perhaps, with the exception of the beautiful clubs and shields figured by Smyth‡ from various localities, is this incised ornamentation more marked, than in the patterns used to

* Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 329.

† Two Exped. Int. E. Australia, 1838, ii. p. 342.

‡ Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. pp. 300 and 331.

enchase many of our Natives' boomerangs. As a general rule the surfaces of this interesting missile are plain, but in other cases a series of incised lines cover one at least of these aspects, arranged in a variety of devices, the figures being enclosed by right or undulating lines. Very few of these ornate weapons have been figured, and still less described, and perhaps, in consequence, a few notes on three very excellent examples may not be out of place. The boomerangs in question are from Norley on the Bulloo River, about twenty miles from Thargomindah, in N.S. Wales, and I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. S. Chatfield, L.S., of Sydney, for an opportunity of figuring them.

The weapons are nearly of a size, about two feet six inches long, whether measured from point to point, or along the curve, and from two, to two and a-half inches wide, practically flat on one face and plain, gently arched or convex on the other, that bearing the incised figures. Two of the weapons are gently and gracefully curved, the third is slightly elbowed or bent transversely in the middle line, and this is the most ornate, whilst all are emarginate at the apices, with a small central mucronate extension.

In the first boomerang (Pl. xv. fig. 1) the incised lines form four unequal disjointed serpentine figures, each consisting of four lines. They occupy three-fourths of the surface, the remaining portion being unornamented, possibly left so from want of time, or opportunity for its completion, and even one figure is more incomplete than its fellows. Each is returned on itself twice. Four of the loops and one of the marginal spaces are carved, three of the former with broken zig-zag markings, whilst in the latter the lines are double. The remaining loop carries two V-shaped notches, part of a third, and seven longitudinal series of single and separate incisions, from three to six in a row. In three instances the free ends of the loops are ended short off by transverse bars. The loops represent figures resembling a much drawn out letter S. The whole of the incised lines are well inscribed, the only trace of wavering appears to have been at the rounded ends or return of the loops.

The second boomerang presents a much simpler pattern, consisting of intra-marginal waved or serpentine figures that do not

joint at their ends, but remain free and extend the whole length of the weapon. The figures consist of three runs, each of two lines, or six in all. The crown or centre of the boomerang bears a single run of broken zig-zag notches extending its whole length (Pl. xv. fig. 2).

The third boomerang (Pl. xv. fig. 3), that with the slight knee at the centre, presents the greatest complexity of ornament, and is the most highly carved boomerang that has yet come under my notice. The two halves of the surface differ somewhat in pattern, but the chief elements are the following:—The crown presents an undulating serpentine figure of three double incised lines returned at each end on itself in the form of loops, but one, the larger, ending abruptly against its first part, whilst the smaller passes underneath its first part. Both ends of this figure stop considerably short of the boomerang apices, and are not even perfectly equilateral with regard to the central transverse line of the weapon. The intra-marginal areas are occupied by a series of successive half-ovals, also formed by three runs of two lines each. There are two pairs of these ovals at each end beyond the termination of the central serpentine figure, but they are not equal in size, nor as to the space occupied by them. All other intervening spaces carry smaller ovals, and right or curved line incisions cut in different directions. The immediate apices of the boomerang are smooth, but at one end there is a space occupied by a broken zig-zag line of single notches.

The weight of these boomerangs is nearly the same, twelve and fourteen ounces respectively. They are, I believe, made of Miall wood, and are fighting boomerangs, and are propelled by being thrown under the left or shield arm.

It will be noticed that when these weapons are held in the hand with the incised or convex side uppermost, that two curve to the right, and the other, or that with the least sculpture, to the left. In other words, the surfaces have been reversed.

With regard to carved boomerangs generally, I have failed to obtain any evidence as to the meaning of the devices—whether

tribal or individual, but Mr. E. Palmer* states that amongst the North Queensland Blacks, who use this weapon, incised undulating lines were used to denote ownership. Nor, so far as I am aware, is anything known of the area over which a boomerang with a given pattern ranges; or again, are fighting or come-back boomerangs differently carved. Many of our more experienced bushmen could doubtless answer these queries, and it would be very advantageous to possess the information in a published form. Mr. Palmer's statement is borne out by the much earlier expressed opinion of Collins, who says† that each tribe employed a particular form of carving on their weapons to indicate the part of the country to which they belonged.

I now purpose giving a few short notes on some of the various devices used in carved boomerangs, in each case citing the authority for the information.

(a) *Single line of rhombs*.—This was one of the earliest patterns observed, for when giving a general description of the weapon, Sir T. L. Mitchell‡ figures an example in which the entire surface is so covered. The same pattern was in use about Port Macquarie, but the ends of this boomerang were incised with V-shaped markings, concave inwards. Breton figures§ one of these, but the influence of the whites even at this early date (1833) was manifest, for the centre of the weapon bears the profile of a head, clearly intended, from the hat surmounting it, for that of a white man. Wood also, in his "Natural History of Man," depicts|| one of the large "sword boomerangs" with a series of joined elongated rhombs in a single line. Again, a third example of this style of sculpture is represented¶ by Mr. G. F. Angas in a short account of the Aborigines. It is said to be a recoiling boomerang, but no locality is mentioned.

* Journ. Anthrop. Inst. Gt. Brit. and Ireland, 1884, xiii. p. 288.

† Acc. of the English Colony in N. S. Wales, 1804, p. 377.

‡ Two Exped. Int. E. Australia, 1838, ii. p. 342.

§ Excursions in N. S. Wales, 1833, p. 255, pl. fig. 1-4.

|| Vol. Australia, 1870, p. 50, f. 1 (lower series).

¶ Waugh's Australian Almanac for 1858, p. 56, f. 10.

(b) *Double line of rhombs*.—Amongst his illustrations of native implement sculpture, Mr. R. B. Smyth figures a double line of rhombs,* but mentions no locality or district in which this pattern occurs.

(c) *Treble line of rhombs, with scalloped edges*.—The same author also gives a representation† of this form, three lines of rhombs parallel to another, not extending quite to the apices, and with the edges scalloped by triangular or semi-rhombic festooning.

(d) *Single continuous zig-zag pattern*.—This is represented‡ by Mr. Angas at each end of a fighting boomerang, but the centre of the illustration is left plain, whether intentionally so or not I cannot say. The figures are enclosed by single lines on each side. In this instance, also, the locality is wanting.

(e) *Double continuous zig-zag pattern*.—Amongst Smyth's illustrations already referred to this form, occur§ two parallel fluctuating or zig-zag figures extending apparently the length of the boomerang, and re-uniting at the apices. Unfortunately this is not localised. This pattern is also given by Dr. George Bennett and the Rev. G. Wood. Dr. Bennett's illustration|| represents a "come-back," or recoiling boomerang, made of myrtle wood, but without locality. Wood's figure¶ is that of a large double curved weapon. Smyth states** that in the Mackay District waved lines are generally employed. How far north such boomerangs extend is not within my knowledge, for Dr. Creed says†† that the weapon is unknown at Cape York, a fact that is confirmed by my friend Mr. J. A. Thorpe, Taxidermist to the Australian Museum, who resided for many months in the old days amongst the northern Cape York tribes. MacGillivray even goes further and states

* Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 285, f. 37.

† Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 329.

‡ Waugh's Australian Almanac for 1858, p. 56, f. 9.

§ Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 285, f. 37.

|| Gatherings of a Naturalist, 1860, p. 291, f. 16.

¶ Nat. Hist. Man. Vol. Australia, 1870, p. 50, f. 2 (lower series).

** Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 329.

†† Journ. Anthropol. Inst. Gt. Brit. and Ireland, 1878, vii. p. 266.

that the boomerang is unknown from Cape York to Port Essington, a distance covering about ten degrees of longitude. Spears and clubs only are met with at Cape York and Port Essington. This fact was also dwelt on by Mr. G. W. Earl,* and has been more recently referred to by myself† in connection with the Alligator River Tribes, Port Essington.

(f) *Single longitudinal line of ovals*.—Dr. Bennett figured‡ a fighting boomerang, without locality, bearing a line of oval figures joined together. A somewhat similar form of ornament has also been illustrated by myself§ from the tableland country to the south of Port Essington, on a weapon collected by Mr. H. Stockdale.

(g) *The same, with scalloped edge*.—This type is also known from the Port Essington Tableland, and “consists of a median line of elongately-oval figures, interrupted at the centre of the weapon by a broad transverse bar, with a narrower bar at each end. The convex and concave edges bear a festoon [or scalloped] pattern, the festoons longitudinally grooved, and not necessarily facing one another on opposite sides [edges]. The synclines of the festoon outline are each distinguished by two transverse notches or nicks.”||

(h) *Double longitudinal line of ovals, edges with semi-rhombs*.—The single line of oval figures, always elongate, is replaced by two series, and cut in half by a median transverse band. The margins bear an edging of continuous half-rhombs or diamond-shaped figures. In each re-entering angle between the half-rhombs there are two V-shaped marks or notches. Port Essington Tableland.¶

(i) *The same, edges with semi-ovals and semi-circles*.—The lateral zones in this case exhibit on the one irregular semi-ovals, and

* Journ. R. Geogr. Soc., 1846, xvi. p. 247.

† Macleay Mem. Vol. (Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales), 1893, p. 236, t. 32, f. 5.

‡ Gatherings of a Naturalist, 1860, p. 291, f. 16.

§ Macleay Mem. Vol. (*loc. cit.*), t. 32, f. 6.

|| Macleay Mem. Vol. (Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales), 1893, p. 237, t. 32, f. 1.

¶ Macleay Mem. Vol. (Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales), 1893, p. 237, t. 32, f. 3.

on the other semi-circles, all cross-hatched, and alternating in each series with V-shaped notches. There is no transverse central band in this case. Port Essington Tableland.*

(k) *Double and treble line of ovals, with scalloped edges.*—A highly and peculiarly ornate boomerang is figured† by Lumholtz, from Coomoooolaroo, Central Queensland. The weapon is centrally divided by the usual transverse bar in the centre, and one at either end cutting off the apices, which are not mucronate. On the one half the surface are two lines of long ovals, and on the other three, the ornament is therefore not bilaterally symmetrical. It is a gently curved and non-returning weapon.

(l) *Single transverse chevron ornament.*—A simple pattern of this nature is figured‡ by the Rev. G. Wood, in his work already referred to. The single chevron, or V-shaped sculpture, is concave inwards from both ends of the boomerang.

(m) *Multi-transverse chevron ornament.*—This description of ornamental carving, which, together with the herring-bone pattern, is one of the earliest styles of weapon and utensil sculpture in the world's history is figured§ by Dr. G. Bennett on a boomerang from Shoalhaven, N. S. Wales. The herring-bone and chevron pattern was the form of ornament that the old Celts decorated their clay pots with.||

(n) *Simple concentric ornament.*—Concentric lines parallel to the outline of the boomerang are figured¶ by Smyth. In this particular instance there are three incised grooves, one within the other, whilst the centre of the weapon is occupied by a longitudinal bar, also three lines. As in the case of so many of Smyth's figures, this is without a locality.

* Macleay Mem. Vol. (Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales), 1893, p. 237, t. 32, f. 2.

† Amongst Cannibals, 1890, p. 51, f. b.

‡ Nat. Hist. Man. Vol. Australia, 1870, p. 50, f. 3 (lower series).

§ Gatherings of a Naturalist, 1860, p. 291, f. 16.

|| A. Lang, "Custom and Myth," p. 281.

¶ Aborigines of Victoria, 1878, i. p. 285, f. 37.

(o) *Natural objects*.—These appear to be of rare occurrence. Eyre figured* an object on the boomerang termed by him *Wāngn* or *Wangno*, resembling a snake, and I have published† a second from the Port Essington Tableland. It is also possible that another figure ‡ given in the “Macleay Memorial Volume” may represent a natural object; the outline of the figure, so far as it goes, and its snout-like termination favour this view. The marginal fringe of transverse lines might almost lead us to imagine this to be a Millipede.

This epitome of incised patterns is by no means intended as an exhaustive one; it simply includes those that have come within the scope of my own reading. Doubtless many others are known to those having a more extended knowledge of the subject than I have. At the same time, the present notes may tend to call attention to the wide field there is for profitable investigation in this form of aboriginal weapon.

I am indebted for the illustrations, as on former occasions, to Mr. Charles Hedley, F.L.S.

DESCRIPTION OF PLATE XV.

Fig. 1.—Boomerang carved over three-fourths of one surface, in the form of loops returned on themselves, and each representing a drawn out, and in three instances a reversed letter S.

Fig. 2.—Boomerang carved over the whole of one surface in the form of two longitudinal fluctuating figures, with a central zig-zag line.

Fig. 3.—Boomerang, highly ornate, with a central serpentine figure, marginal loops and other complex incisions.

* Journ. Exped. Discov. Central Australia, 1845, ii. t. 3, f. 8.

† Macleay Mem. Vol. (Linn. Soc. N. S. Wales), 1893, p. 238, t. 32, f. 6.

‡ *Loc. cit.* t. 32, f. 5.